

Meeting with Members of Congress

1. Developing a Strategy

Research the positions of your Member of the U.S. Congress (from the Senate and/or House of Representatives) on HIV and health issues. Check their opinions and voting records - through past and current news articles and through their Web site. Voting records can be found at the Library of Congress website: <http://thomas.loc.gov/>.

Know and understand the past and current relationship your organization has with the offices of your elected official. This includes knowing about recent visits and communication with the Washington and district offices.

Select no more than five HIV related health issues affecting your community to discuss; then, decide on specific objectives for the meeting. The objectives should include an assessment of the possible responses your Member of Congress may have on these issues.

If more than one person from your organization attends the meetings decide ahead of time who will address each issue or point.

You can scan the AIDS Action website for up-to-date background information on your particular areas of advocacy - www.aidsaction.org.

2. Scheduling your Meeting

Call the Member of Congress' office and ask to speak with the appointment secretary or scheduler in order to schedule a meeting. Most offices require a written request to be mailed or faxed to the office as well. You may also want to speak to the person who handles HIV issues on your Member's behalf and review what you would like to discuss.

Confirm your request with a brief letter that reiterates the date of your appointment, the HIV issues to be discussed, and the names and affiliations of each attendee.

Recognize that your Member may not meet with you in person. Instead, they may ask their staff member who handles HIV and/or health issues to attend the meeting. Do not be disappointed! This is the person who follows key legislation and writes the Member's speeches, letters, talking points, and other communications on HIV.

3. Preparing for the Meeting

Convene a pre-meeting of your group to identify specific requests your group wants to make and to be sure that everyone understands these requests. At this time, you should also determine the desired outcome of the meeting.

Prepare documents that outline your specific HIV issue(s), the purpose of your meeting, your contact information, and any factual information on your selected issues. Make sure the documents are concise and formal in style, and that they clearly state what action you would like the elected official to take. Be prepared to leave these documents or any other supporting documents with the Member of Congress or their staff as the meeting concludes.

4. Conducting the Meeting

Introduce each person by saying who they are, what group they represent, and what their interests are. Present the issues clearly. Do not assume the Member of Congress or staff person knows or understands what your organization does or what issue you wish to discuss. Give specific examples of how HIV impacts their district or state and how your organization/program is addressing and solving these problems.

Mention specific health and/or HIV legislation by name and number. Specify what you would like the Representative to do in response to HIV, related health issues, and community needs. Try to obtain a solid commitment of action (i.e. co-sponsorship of legislation or letter sign-on). Be honest. Do not be afraid to admit that you do not know the answer to a question, but be prepared to research the question further and give an answer at a later date. Explain concretely how you can help the Member of Congress on HIV issues in your district or state.

End on a positive note, even if you did not meet all of your objectives. Thank the Member or staff person for taking the time to meet with your group.

5. Follow-Up

The group leader should be responsible for sending one thank you letter that highlights the major points raised during the meeting and any agreed-upon next steps in solving specific problems identified.

Invite the Member or staff person, in writing, to visit your organization for a tour or for a special event being held. It is very important that they are able to see for themselves the services you are offering to their constituents. In addition, request their attendance at special recognition days such as World AIDS Day (December 1st), National Testing Day (June 27th), or other events important on a national, local, or organizational level.